

A New Discovery from the Lab

Private cable operators – and property owners and managers – need a “PCO Lab” to develop common standards and solutions for the ultra-broadband era

By Bryan Rader ■ *Bandwidth Consulting LLC*

It's amazing to me what happens to an industry when it works together in a collaborative way. Think about times of crisis for an industry. Every company starts communicating about the common problem, there is suddenly incredible openness and cooperation, and leaders collectively focus on joint solutions.

Why does it take a crisis for companies to do that? Operators should work all the time with one another on our industry's problems before they develop into future crises.

Indeed, we have done a good job in the regulatory and legislative arena working together. IMCC has gathered its leaders frequently to talk about challenges in Washington and how to handle specific issues. There has been great cooperation on key legal topics among private cable operators, and I applaud (and encourage) such continued efforts.

This type of group effort also occurred a few years ago when WSNet was planning to shut down, and the industry was grappling with many similar issues.. PCOs gathered on weekly calls to talk openly about solutions, quick fixes and ways to handle the loss of WSNet services. It was a moment of great collaboration!

But isn't something missing when we don't harness this type of openness and cooperation in other areas of our business? I believe that we are making a big mistake by not collaborating more regularly on engineering solutions for our properties and cable systems. And I believe there is a tremendous opportunity to change that.

One of the common complaints I hear from PCOs is that they need more engineering support and expertise – infrastructure, headend, satellite, broad-

band, you name it. All PCOs are working on similar issues and challenges, yet we are not cross-sharing our ever-developing expertise with the rest of the industry. That's too bad.

Other industries have dealt with similar issues and found ways to work together, and so have our primary competitors – the big phone and cable guys.

USE THE MSO MODEL

In the 1920s, AT&T and Western Electric formed Bell Laboratories to support the Bell operating systems and their engineers. And more recently in 1988, the large franchise cable operators created CableLabs as a nonprofit research and development consortium, dedicated to pursuing new cable TV technologies and standards for its key members.

And look at some of the successful initiatives that the cable companies have addressed through CableLabs in the recent past. It created DOCSIS, which defines the interface requirements for cable modems. It developed new initiatives like PacketCable and OpenCable, to set industry standards for all operators. And it continues to create other R&D solutions for franchise operators across the US and even across the world.

CableLabs understands that every system is different, and that every operator has different needs and challenges. But it has been very effective at harnessing its industry's talent to look for flexible solutions to commonly shared problems.

Well, PCOs have commonly shared problems too, don't we? We deal with similar issues on our systems, issues that demand strong engineering skills. And I bet we would benefit from our own version of CableLabs.

The spirit of such an effort is built around collaboration and openness with one another, similar to what we experienced with the WSNet and regulatory situations. We must tap into this “spirit” and find a way to use this energy to better support PCOs' engineering efforts.

So, what would it look like? I envision a consortium of engineering leaders and experts from around our industry who could devote their time to this new effort – PCO Labs. The first objective would be to identify the short list of common industry challenges. What issues are impacting us the most?

This list can then be given to our group of PCO Labs experts to determine if any current solutions exist, or if there is a need for a new approach. And if we need a new solution, we have numerous vendors and suppliers ready to participate in this process (just as CableLabs does).

I also believe that “PCO Labs” could be very helpful in creating engineering standards for our industry, something I know the real estate community would appreciate.

Think about our own version of CableLabs. A little collaboration and cooperation may help everyone. And we don't need a lab to discover *this* solution! **BBP**

About the Author

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